



# Police need wellness checks too: Embedding a culture of wellness and resilience in policing

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The policing profession is in the midst of a global mental health and wellness crisis (Edwards, 2023). The police workforce (including police officers and non-uniform members) serves as the backbone to maintaining community safety and well-being; however, sentiments across the profession point to an overwhelming sense of stress, burnout, and mental health-related issues. Anxiety, depression, alcohol and substance abuse, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder are being reported at alarming rates among police service members (Tam-Seto & Thompson, 2023). A Canadian study showed that 37% of police officers at the municipal and provincial level and 50% of police officers at the federal level reported having a mental health disorder (Carleton et al., 2017, as cited in Grupe, 2023). These are just disclosed statistics. The mental health and wellness of the workforce is not a sector-specific issue; it is a human issue—one facing every single police service in Canada and, indeed, globally.

We sponsored the first special edition of the *Journal of Community Safety & Well-Being* focused on “Envisaging the Future,” because we recognize that you cannot have safe, healthy, and resilient communities without a safe, healthy, and resilient police workforce. Full stop. Wellness, focused on health promotion and disease prevention, is foundational to a sustainable model of policing that supports the health and safety of our communities. Recognizing this is a complex issue that will not be solved with simple solutions, our Security and Justice and Health Care practices have come together to co-sponsor this second special edition focused on wellness and resilience in policing.

## A Holistic Approach to Health and Wellness

The mental health and wellness crisis facing police services today calls for a new approach to how we build and maintain the health and wellness of the police workforce. Like other shifts in policing, wellness needs to be approached holistically, with a shift to preventive approaches and away from reactive approaches rooted in “sick care” or treatment. Research has demonstrated that social drivers—such as socioeconomic status, neighbourhood and physical environment, and social community—play an important role in the health and well-being of people. From an external service delivery perspective, the policing sector knows this, with formal integrated

planning frameworks developed to cultivate more integrated approaches to resolving complex human issues that create or perpetuate vulnerability in communities (Government of Ontario, 2021). It is no different when looking inward. Policing mental health and wellness programs need to consider the holistic needs of the individual while at work and home.

One way we can better support the health and wellness of the police workforce is through community. When a new member joins the police service, they join a community of like-minded professionals who serve and protect others, as well as each other. The question remains: how can police organizations and leaders leverage this embedded community to support common goals, address health and wellness issues, and take a proactive approach to maintain wellness within the police workforce? As described in Deloitte’s *Smart Health Communities and the Future of Health* report, we need to empower individuals to proactively manage their health and well-being, foster a sense of community and belonging and use digital technologies to improve health and wellness (Dhar et al., 2019). Thanks to digital technologies, communities no longer need to be physically together to be connected. With police officers and non-uniform members working across diverse geographies and communities, digital technologies can play an impactful role in opening up channels to engage with others in their community facing common challenges—such as parents in the service, or those returning to work following an injury or traumatic event. Once the sole domain of hospitals and clinicians, health and wellness is now inexorably intertwined with every part of our lives, demanding a holistic approach that takes into account the interplay of individual and community, enabled through digital technologies that connect the police workforce with information and each other.

## A Resilient and Empowered Police Service

In our recent article, *In Pursuit of Next-era Community Safety and Well-Being*, we documented the need for police and social services to collaborate more closely to create safe and resilient communities (Jackson & Hjartarson, 2022). Connected communities are resilient communities. Fostering a sense of community within the police service can improve wellness and build resiliency—two facets of policing that are mutually dependent on one another to realize their full potential.

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Building a resilient workforce means we can't wait until mental health challenges arise to provide support; we need to empower members of the policing community to proactively manage their own health and wellness. This in turn means cultivating a policing culture where the benefits of this empowerment can be fully realized and barriers to help-seeking are minimized.

We need to provide support through dedicated policies and programs that encourage help-seeking behaviours and tools to empower police services to actively access and participate in these programs. How does speaking about a resilient and empowered police workforce shift the narrative around police health and wellness? It opens the door to breaking down barriers and addressing the traditional stigma associated with help-seeking behaviour to focus on the concept of resiliency as a springboard to authentic wellness. We believe that being empowered goes hand in hand with being resilient.

### An Authentic Culture of Wellness

If you build it, will they come? An age-old question. Empowering the police workforce to proactively manage their own health and wellness doesn't stop with wellness-related policies and procedures, and tools and resources. It requires building an authentic culture of wellness in which the promotion of mental health and wellness is embedded in the values and principles underpinning the operation of the police service. Addressing the known barriers to help-seeking behaviours among police officers is critical to building such a culture.

Significant research, including the research in this special edition of the Journal, has documented concerns regarding police culture, where seeking help is often stigmatized for fear of being perceived as weak or lacking the capacity to do one's job. There is a longstanding traditional culture of needing to convey having "everything under control all the time." Given this, it is no surprise that in a study of 4,020 currently serving public safety personnel (including police service members), 43% to 60% stated they would never, or only as a last resort, seek professional mental health services (Carleton et al., 2020, as cited in Drew & Martin, 2023). Reframing "strength" and "courage" in policing to embrace vulnerability must be the first step on the journey to addressing the crisis. Deloitte's *Diversity and Inclusion Revolution* report puts it simply—creating an inclusive and diverse organizational culture has an immense impact on people's lives. They feel included when they are respected, are able to show up as their authentic selves, feel safe to speak up, and feel empowered to do their best work (Bourke & Dillon, 2018). We cannot solve for wellness in policing without this side of the equation and this is a pivotal moment to cultivate a culture that mirrors this, a culture where reaching out and asking for help is recognized as a sign of strength, not weakness.

### Call to Action

Addressing the policing mental health and wellness crisis is a complex challenge—one that we must solve together. Like other big problems facing society, we need to break the existing silos between policing, justice, and health and wellness-related organizations. While the specific stresses and challenges police service members face are unique to their profession, as we highlighted at the start of this piece, these professionals are not alone in facing this crisis. Given there are over 150 police services in Canada (Statistics Canada,

2020), any strategies looking to address common challenges should consider scalability and economies of scale as part of design and planning efforts. This includes for example, screening programs to identify mental health challenges, driving adoption of employee assistance programs (EAPs), expanding benefits coverage, and creating communities of wellness and social connection.

Initiatives from beyond the security and justice sector have shown great success in adapting proven mental health and wellness strategies to realize economies of scale. For example, Bell Canada implemented an enhanced return-to-work program that increases support for employees facing mental illness and their leaders through early intervention and communication and uses an online accommodation tool to improve the employee experience (Chapman et al., 2019). As a result, Bell has seen its employees' mental health-related short-term disability relapse and recurrence decrease by over 50% from 2010 baseline levels.

In adapting and developing mental health and wellness strategies, it will be critical for police organizations to focus on outcomes measurement as a driver for planning. We need to understand what works well, what doesn't, and why in the context of police mental health and wellness to repeat and scale successes. Because this is a universal issue, there is immense value in the research and findings that go into this topic. They can be learned from, replicated, and scaled across jurisdictions. If solutions are developed on an agency-by-agency basis, we run the risk of having an impact that is siloed, costly, and inefficient. Policing and public safety agencies have an unparalleled ability to rally around and support one another in times of shared need and crisis; the wellness and resilience crisis facing the police workforce presents both an imperative and an opportunity for scaled collaboration and support that poses too real a risk not to recognize and seize. Collaboration at this scale presents a major opportunity to accelerate and maximize impact by exploring solutions driven locally but applied at a sector or regional level.

We would like to thank the numerous researchers and authors across the world who have contributed to this exceptionally important topic. Through your work, you are highlighting that, just like the communities they serve, police officers need wellness checks too. Who's checking in on police to make sure they are ok?

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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